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AUTHOR Harman, David
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ABSTRACT

The late commissioner of education, James Allen, proclaimed the "Right to Read" as the educational target of the current decade. The object was to inculcate and improve reading skills among 25 percent of the American population who either lacked or were deficient in them. Has this goal been at least half-way attained? Midway through the 1970's it must be admitted that the goal has not been realized at all. In fact, there is every indication that the situation is actually more severe than was initially posed, and the gaps between readers and nonreaders may actually be widening. The crux of the reading failure syndrome lies in the creation of "conditions for reading" or a "reading environment," implying a need for organized intervention among population groups not attending schools (parents and preschool children). Parents, who must require reading skills in order to function and who are the pivotal factors in the creation of home environments, are those most neglected by organized reading instruction efforts. Reading instruction within the framework of recurrent education is the theme expounded. The target remains vitally desirable; the remedies are in need of alteration. With a fresh look at strategies, "Right-to-Read" is attainable. (Author/AJ)

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THE "RIGHT TO READ":

AN ASSESSMENT

David Harman

September 1975

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Six years ago the late Commissioner of Education, James Allen, proclaimed the "Right-to-Read" as the educational target of the current decade. The object of this educational moonshot was to inculcate and improve reading skills among 25% of the American population who, Allen claimed, either lacked or were deficient in them.[1] Midway through the decade it is appropriate to ask whether this goal has at least been half way attained.

Available evidence indicates that the state of reading in 1975 is no better than it was at the turn of the decade. New investigations lend credence to the disturbing possibility that the situation was in fact more severe than initially posed, and remains so today. I would also suggest that there remains a lack of clarity regarding the shape and character of the goal itself - what should constitute reading in the United States on the eve of the 21st century.

What is commonly referred to as reading level bears only incidental relation to the actual act of reading - of deciphering a code of letters into meaningful words and phrases. Rather, reading level relates more directly to the comprehension of what is read. Clearly, comprehension is associated intimately with one's experience, environment and interests. Social, cultural and economic realities combine to form a context to which comprehension is bound. The combination of these factors - already highly sophisticated in the American experience - never plateaus; it constantly agitates to reach new heights and forever seeks new peaks. Levels of literacy, in terms of comprehension linked context, that are adequate today will be insufficient in the future, just as those of yesteryear required redefinition in order to comply with contemporary realities. These variables, moreover, are inexorable intertwined with the unique situation of each and every country's socio-economic and cultural ambience. Levels of literacy - of comprehension - that would suffice to make a person literate in one area of the world would transform him into a functional illiterate in another. It is for this reason that there cannot be a universal definition of

literacy, that the only valid determinations are those derived from the specific character of each nation. As this character undergoes transformation, as the experience, environment, and interests of the individual develop, so too will the levels of comprehension demanded of people. This is a dynamic concept for these elements, particularly in today's world, are in constant flux. A second, related, dynamic notion emanates from the fact that occupational activity increases in complexity concurrently with and parallel to this process, causing in its wake increasingly complicated reading tasks. Reading is not a static skill in that once acquired it needs no further development. The individual is required to keep abreast through constant adaptation.

Reading is not, in and of itself, an objective. The real aim is that of social participation and reading is but a tool - one means - for its attainment. Nor can reading be narrowly confined to the decoding and understanding of written messages. Rather, it entails also the substance that makes its use as a tool meaningful; the content which makes social participation in a much broader sense possible.

In the United States the levels of reading comprehension necessary for such participation are predictably high, and have risen dramatically since World War II. One recent study, for example, concluded that an 11th grade reading level was the minimum requirement for most military professions and these correlate significantly with like civilian pursuits.[2] If an 11th grade level is stipulated as a minimum necessary requirement then surely a desirable minimum would be even higher.

If one is directed by the common supposition that reading is a function of schooling, the signs are encouraging and indicate that Dr. Allen might have been overstating the case. By the end of the decade of the 60's the median years of schooling completed by Americans 25 years of age and above was an impressive 12.3 - the highest such figure in the world. By the end of the current decade it is projected that the median grade level will have climbed even higher, to 12.5.[3] Fewer than 2 million people were reported to have had only a fifth grade or lower education in 1970 and that

figure is expected to drop to about 1.4 million by 1980.[4] Further evidence of the high level of education pertaining in the U.S. can be gleaned from the fact that of those now entering the labor force, in their early twenties, 86% have had high school or better levels of education - this proportion maintaining itself through the end of the decade.[5] Surely, one might posit, such high levels of educational attainment should suffice to create a highly literate society.

School attendance, however, does not guarantee the participant scholastic achievements commensurate with the grade level attained. Not all high school graduates can read at a 12th grade level, or eighth grade graduates at 8th grade level, and so on. Allen had this in mind when he spoke of "those who do not gain (reading ability) in the course of their early education".[6] In this regard the way in which statistics are compiled rather than the figures themselves, serves to dampen the conclusion that in consequence of poor scholastic achievement there is a significant national reading problem. What are commonly thought to be reading grade levels reflect nothing more than the mean score of a group of students participating in norming procedures of standardized tests which, in turn, mostly assume a statistically normal distribution of performance such that by definition, 23% of those tested will receive scores below average while an additional 23% will score above average.[7] Such reporting mechanisms obviously mitigate the severity of the "failure of education" argument.

Statistics, however, tell only a portion of the story and not necessarily the important part. Several investigations conducted over the past few years indicate that inability to read is far more widespread than figures such as these might lead us to believe. The most recent of these studies, following an analysis of actual reading tasks considered perfunctory, indicated that nearly 22% of the population could not read well enough to perform them while an additional 32% tested as being able to master these tasks only marginally.[8] Together, a staggering 54% were shown to be unable or only marginally able to cope with basic reading tasks, regardless of level of formal education completed. It is significant to note that 48% of those with completed high

school educations are included in this group.

Two conclusions can be reached at this point. First, in conventional grade level terms, the level of reading required to actively participate in social and economic life in the U.S. is close to 12. Second, completion of a set number of years of schooling does not provide assurances that graduates do in fact perform and retain performance levels paralleling those of the grades completed. This latter conclusion does not necessarily reflect upon the efficacy of schooling but might well indicate that skills once learned regress when not put to use, shifting the onus of the poor performance issue from the school system to the individual. Both conclusions not only support Commissioner Allen's basic contention but indeed, suggest it might be understated.

Are these two diametrically opposed sets of data reconcilable? Is there, in fact, a "reading crises" in the U.S.? If so, is it remediable?

Several factors intertwine to suggest a plausible answer to these queries. During the past several decades there has been a major shift in the proportions of people employed in the various sectors of the labor market. White collar and service occupations, both usually requiring higher levels of education, currently employ twice as many people as do the blue collar and farming sectors. Indeed, it has been forecast that these trends will continue into the next decade.[9] The demand, then, of the labor market in terms of educational qualifications has been rising, in turn inducing growing numbers of people to seek additional education. The high level of reading requirements for job performance could well be a function of this shift as well as a result of the fact that writers have had more education and are producing materials linguistically more complicated in disregard of the reading public. While on the one hand white collar and service occupations in the aggregate necessitate more reading than do blue collar jobs, it is also true that much of the material being written for both job related and general consumption purposes could be rewritten at lower levels of reading skills without loss of meaning, nuance or emphasis.[10]

Concomitantly, new and easier to digest media have achieved normative mass distribution and participation rates. I refer, of course, to radio and television. Marshall Macluhan has observed that "A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them".[11] Time which might have been devoted to the pursuit of reading is being spent in front of television sets, radios, stereo consoles and tape recorders. It comes as no surprise that despite the incredible upsurge in book production - it is estimated that between 1973 and 1990 more books will be produced than have been throughout history[12] - reading is on the decline, as a proportion of those knowing how to read who actually engage in reading activities.[13] It is a known phenomenon that reading skills, not unlike any other skill, recede through disuse.[14] Moreover, the research cited earlier regarding reading requisites of jobs is based on materials that are considered desirable for job seekers or holders to actually read - not necessarily materials essential for job performance. How much job related information is passed on by word of mouth? How many manuals are actually read? How many jobs emphasize writing skills and not reading skills? Perhaps it is not merely a curious accident that the same study that found 54% of Americans lacking in adequate reading skills revealed that only 42% were lacking in writing capabilities.[15]

Some people have been wont to argue on the basis of information similar to that presented here that reading of the printed word might be a casualty of the combination of modern technology and life styles.[16] That at precisely the age in which mass education has taught proportionately more people than ever before the art of reading, the avocation of literacy is being blunted.

Over and above intuitive, and perhaps emotional responses, negating such suggestions there is evidence, albeit scanty, that reading as a tool is indispensable. Richard Meier, in the late 1950's, convincingly demonstrated that reading remains by far the most efficient means for transmitting information, nearly twice as effective as film, 4 times as effective as television, 5 times more efficient than radio and as much as 15 times more efficient than "observation of environment".[17] Additional research efforts,

yet in infancy - and with only the most paltry of hard data - suggest that people are aware of the desirability of literacy such that after having learned how to read and having caused their reading skills to atrophy through disuse regain reading abilities at a later date and even surpass their additional reading levels.[18] This process, it is hypothesized, occurs without the intervention of schooling or formal reading instruction and is influenced by other, as yet undetermined, factors.

Anthropologists Goody and Watt have pointed out that "the literate individual has in practice so large a field of personal selection from the total cultural repertoire that the odds are strongly against his experiencing the cultural tradition as any sort of patterned whole".[19] They go on in their important essay to quote the often overlooked truism that "Printing so obviously makes knowledge accessible to all that we are inclined to forget that it also makes knowledge very easy to avoid".[20] Understandably, after having learned how to read one exercises one's own discretion as to whether he will make use of reading abilities and in what way. It certainly stands to reason that over time an individual will come to the realization that whereas formerly the act of reading was not thought to be of importance it has assumed a new vitality and urgency and by returning to it might be able to recapture and revitalize a nearly petrified skill.

Unfortunately, many of us are prone, in common language usage, to equate the terms reading, education and schooling, when, in fact the terms are not synonomous at all. Schooling no doubt plays a role in education but the latter is actually a far broader and encompassing process in which the individual is engaged, willy-nilly, from birth onward. Reading is but one set of skills, however significant, that may or may not be taught in schools. Several scholars have indicated that schools essentially act as socializing agents and what is primarily learned within their walls are a series of social coping skills.[21] Although schools also play a role in the transmission of knowledge, this aspect of their functioning has become of lesser importance because of the many other conduits and avenues of information available and utilized by the average person whether by design or osmosis. As noted earlier, reading may or may not be learned

in school. "Sesame Street" is certainly evidence of the major impact television can have on imparting reading skills outside of school. Schools have, indeed, been soundly attacked in recent years for being irrelevant to the needs of tomorrow's adults in that too few of the skills and knowledge taught are of subsequent functional use.[22] Consequently, it is erroneous to assume that completion of a set number of years of schooling can be glibly translated into a parallel reading ability. The fact that more people are recipient of more years of formal schooling does not necessarily mean that more people are able to read well, or for that matter, perform a variety of cognitive and motor tasks at higher and more sophisticated levels.

We are being made increasingly aware of the role of environment in education - a role that most likely transcends that of schools. Thus, for example, environment is now often held responsible for school failure, particularly in regard to disadvantaged groups.[23] With impressive consistency, research findings are proving that what might be considered a "depressed environment" can, for all intents and purposes, cancel out the potentially beneficial effects of schooling.

One's first - and throughout the formative years from birth through age 6 - most embracing environment is that of the home. One's first, all encompassing social milieu is that consisting of family members. Mounting evidence indicates that the impact of family members - especially parents - during the first years of life will ultimately be greater than that of years spent in school; indeed might well determine to a very large extent the degree to which schooling will be effective.

The main actors in the home environment are its adult members - the parents. The people about whom Commissioner Allen expressed concern were America's non-reading adults, graduates of the school system. The school system, however, avoids them as it does young children during the most significant formative years. Does this not suggest a vicious cycle of causation of, among other things, illiteracy? Is it not plausible that non-reading adults provide a non-reading environment which, in turn produces non-reading children? Following a day in school such children will return to their homes,

which more often than not are located in communities of similar homes, and the overall environment will act to erode whatever benefits might have accrued during the hours spent on the school bench. In contrast, children from homes in which reading is normative will, in all liklihood, return to an environment supportive of their school involvements, and encouraging of their efforts at advancement.

For too many years the debate regarding reading failure has focused on the methodological issue of how best to teach reading skills. Volumes of research on this question tend to produce little more than fads which for longer or shorter periods of time are introduced into classroom practice only to be replaced by other fads or by the very methods they sought to replace.[24] With the important exception of "Sesame Street", which introduced a new medium into reading instruction, little else newly significant has emerged from a multitude of efforts in the realm of reading instruction.

Let me suggest that we have collectively been focusing our attention on the wrong issue; that the crux of the reading failure syndrome lies in the creation of what might be appropriately labled "conditions for reading" or a "reading environment". Further, this implies a need for organized intervention among population groups not attending schools - primarily parents and secondarily pre-school age children.

Parents - adults - who most require reading skills in order to function as adults within society and who are the pivotal factors in the creation of home environments, are those most neglected by organized reading instruction efforts. True, the experience of mass adult literacy campaigns in the developing world has served as a discouraging factor for those intent upon teaching reading to adults. But, surely, evidence derived from poorly conceived programs taught by unqualified teachers using methods borrowed from a child's classroom wholly unsuitable for adults,[25] should not deter us from undertaking serious and systematic efforts to develop appropriate adult aimed programs. Indeed, some modest work undertaken both in the U.S. and in several developing countries has clearly shown that illiterate adults can effectively be taught how to read.[26] If

this is possible to achieve in cultures which are essentially non-literate it could certainly become a reality in the U.S.

Numerous attempts to correct educational deficiencies and failures through the alteration of instructional techniques utili[illegible]ls have, at best, been only marginally effective. It stands to reason tha[illegible]r lack of success is not a result of poor educational techniques but, rather or t[illegible]t that formal schooling intervenes in a child's life after six crucial years have already elapsed; years that will have stamped a virtually indelible impression on the child's cognitive and affective development. Schools will cease their intercession prior to the entrance of their graduates into adult roles and responsibilities; before the individual forms more precise notions regarding the skills and knowledge required in the assumption of those roles.

It is being suggested here that a strategy more appropriate than the one currently prevalent for the spread and establishment of reading abilities would shift the focus of activity from traditional classroom participants to adults on the one hand and young children on the other, the latter essentially being an outcome of the former. In such a manner it would be possible to predicate the following outcomes:

a) non-reading adults would become functionally literate, enabling them to improve the quality of their lives and better perform their function within their families, the economy and society;

b) through the agency of participating adults home environments could be effected, creating within the home those supportive conditions necessary for the upbringing of children.

This course of action is not proposed as a panacea to the problems of reading in the U.S. It should not be understood as a substitution for additional improvements in reading materials and reading curricula. Indeed, implementation of this strategy would require significant inputs into the development of reading curricula appropriate for

adults, based on precepts of adult learning. Nor is it implied that the teaching of reading in the schools should cease. On the contrary, school reading efforts would only be enhanced as a result of the evolvement of newly supportive home environments and involvement of parents in the learning of reading process.

The theme expounded here is entirely consistent with a new trend in education that is gradually gaining momentum - that of recurrent education. "Recurrent education", states A.H. Halsey, "...provides a structure of opportunity which will avoid or at least reduce the morally arbitrary character of existing educational arrangements".[27] Recurrent education provides "an alternative to the conventional system concentrated on youth and spreads postcompulsory education over the full life-span", enabling "interaction between education and other social activities during which incidental learning occurs".[28] From an educational vantage point, then, the theme of recurrent education and reading instruction within its framework is most attractive as it enables a continuous input which could foster change and facilitate renewal.

Half way through the 1970's it must be admitted that the goals of "Right-to-Read" have not been realized at all. In fact, there is every indication that the situation Commissioner Allen sought to rectify is actually more severe than was initially posed. We would not be amiss in entertaining the notion that it is not inconceivable that the gaps between readers and non-readers are actually widening. While one segment of the population is surging ahead, sharpening its reading and related intellectual abilities into tools of fine precision, the other portion is advancing at a snail's pace and quite likely is not moving forward at all.

The target remains vitally desirable. The remedies that have been applied in attempts to reach the target are in need of alteration. A fresh look at strategies, at the various interlocking components of reading and reading requisites on the one hand and instructional mechanisms on the other, suggests itself as the propitious approach to this issue in the future. While it seems unlikely that "Right-to-Read" will be attained during the span of this decade, it need be reaffirmed that "Right-to-Read" is attainable.

The noted Brazilian philosopher and educator, Paulo Freire, wrote that:[29]

> Learning to speak and write ought to be an opportunity for men to know what speaking and word really means: a human act implying reflection and action. As such it is a primordial human right and not the privilege of a few. Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of expression, of creating and recreating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process.

It is for these reasons that the Right-to-Read effort is such a cogent social goal; it is for these reasons that it is incumbent upon all associated with reading and education - indeed all who profess social concerns - to join forces in a concerted effort to eradicate the vestiges of illiteracy.

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